

The tragedy of old age

In 1914 "geriatrics" was a new word. This editorial presents a candid, turn-of-the-century view of life as an elderly person. In recent years the aged and infirm have often been termed hospital "bedblockers." On page 1493 of this issue Eleanor LeBourdais reports on some positive steps being taken to address the problem of bedblockers.

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The life of the aged always ends in tragedy, and there is a natural desire to hide the more sordid tragedies out of sight. The interest in the aged is confined to their immediate families. It is sometimes sentimental. More often it is merely dutiful. Occasionally it is not even that. The situation is worse amongst the rich than amongst the poor. The aged poor are nothing more than an encumbrance. Their passing is a negative relief to their relatives, a positive relief to themselves. The irony of the matter amongst the rich is that their taking off is usually of positive value to themselves and to their relatives as well. For them there is an end to misery; for their relatives an end of care, and the possibility, if not the certainty, of sharing in an inheritance.

This editorial was published in the May 1914 (vol. 4, no. 5) issue of CMAJ, pages 418 to 419.

For the old the young have little sympathy. They may pretend to suffer with them, but in reality they do not. Real sympathy would only increase the sum of suffering; and the young, with the egotism of youth, have an unconquerable aversion from destroying their own happiness by making themselves sharers in a misery they cannot alleviate. For the aged to demand such a sacrifice is in turn a manifestation of the egotism of the old. There is no spectacle more pathetic than a young life sacrificed to the tyranny of kith and kin, and it is the more pathetic when youth is yielded ungrudgingly. Two lives are destroyed instead of one.

Such is the law in western communities. It is the incentive of all labour, lest a man be cast in his old age upon the mercy of his own. That is the tragedy of *Lear*, although one cannot withhold from his daughters a certain sympathy. They had a sure perception of their father's silliness in bothering with equerries and men-at-arms at his time of life. Amongst the Orientals a different view prevails. The old are venerated whilst they are alive; and their ancestors are venerated not because they are dead, but because they are ancestors. In a roundabout way this fidelity has its own reward. The aged are smitten in their conscience, and assist in their own taking off.

These reflections have arisen from a book entitled "Geriatrics."^{*}

Dr. Nascher, the author, also perceives, and says so with much feeling, that there is a natural reluctance to exert one's self for those who are economically worth-

^{*}Geriatrics. The Diseases of Old Age and Their Treatment including Physiological Old Age, Home and Institutional Care, and Medico-Legal Relations. By I.L. Nascher, MD. with an introduction by A. Jacobi, MD. Illustrated. Price \$5.00 net. P. Blakiston's Son & Company, Philadelphia, 1914

less, and must remain so. Their appearance, he admits, is generally unaesthetic, their actions objectionable, their very existence often an incubus to those who in a spirit of humanity or duty take upon themselves the care of the aged. And yet the world would be the poorer if it were not for the presence of many of the aged and the suffering. Dr. Nascher* puts the matter in its true light when he says that all ulterior consider-

ations are paltry in the face of the physician's self-imposed task to relieve distress and prolong life.

Geriatrics is a new word; but there was a time when "pediatrics" also was strange. It may be of some comfort to the old to reflect that the diseases peculiar to their condition are coming in for especial consideration. The subject was taken up forty years ago by Charcot at the Salpêtrière in a series of lectures which were translated and added to by Dr. Loomis of New York in 1881, under the title of "Diseases of Old Age." Dr. Nascher has now made the subject his own, and he has written a most interesting and valuable book besides.■

**(For those interested, see the History article "Dr. Ignatz Nascher and the birth of geriatrics" (Can Med Assoc J 1990; 143: 944-945, 948). — Ed.)*

Conferences

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Feb. 23-26, 1992: Pan-American Doctors' Medical Society for Generalists and Specialists (Canadian section) 47th Annual Meeting

Manzanillo, Mexico

Dr. D.P. Hill, Continuing Medical Education, Ottawa General Hospital, 501 Smyth Rd., Ottawa, ON K1H 8L6; (613) 737-8455

Feb. 24-28, 1992: College of Family Physicians of Canada (Alberta chapter) 37th Annual Scientific Assembly Banff Springs Hotel, Banff, Alta.

Mrs. E. Taschuk, Ste. 203, 12230-106 Ave., Edmonton, AB T5N 3Z1; (403) 488-2395, fax (403) 488-2396

Feb. 24-Mar. 2, 1992: International Federation of Surgical Colleges Meeting

Cape Town, South Africa

Prof. W.A.L. MacGowan, International Federation of Surgical Colleges, 16 Harcourt St., Dublin 2, Ireland

Feb. 26-28, 1992: Meeting of British/Egyptian Surgical Societies

Cairo

Meetings secretary, Royal College of Medicine, 1 Wimpole St., London W1M 8AE, England

Feb. 26-29, 1992: International Conference on Adjuvant Therapy of Primary Lung Cancer

St. Gallen, Switzerland

Conference manager, Medizinische C, Kantonsspital PO Box CH-9007, St. Gallen, Switzerland

Feb. 29-Mar. 1, 1992: Endoscopy Update 1992: the Southern California Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy Symposium

Century Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles

Joyce M. Fried, Brain Research Institute, University of California, Center for the Health Sciences, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1761

Mar. 8-11, 1992: European Congress on Anaerobic Bacteria

Vienna

Secretariat, European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, PO Box 33, 03 47, D-8000 Munich 33, Germany

Mar. 8-12, 1992: International Conference on Emergency Civilian Medical Services in a Nonconventional Mode Tel Aviv, Israel

Conference coordinator, Kenes USA, 903-271 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016; (212) 986-8300

Mar. 8-13, 1992: International Symposium on Hypertension in the Community

Jerusalem

Conference coordinator, Kenes USA, 903-271 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016; (212) 986-8300

Mar. 8-14, 1992: Medical Women's International Association Congress

Guatemala City

Congress Organizing Committee, Oficina 713, Ala Norte, Edificio Tikal BA, Calle 4-16, Zona 1, Guatemala City, Guatemala

Du 10 au 12 mars 1992 : Les entretiens de Lyon —

L'ordinateur partenaire : interactions homme-machine Lyon, France

Solange Dubeauclard, 1030 N Glenhurst, Birmingham, MI 48009; (313) 647-7833

Mar. 10-12, 1992: The Lyon Conference — The Computer as a Partner: Human-Machine Interactions

Lyon, France

Solange Dubeauclard, 1030 N Glenhurst, Birmingham, MI 48009; (313) 647-7833